DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 302 852 CS 211 632

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TITLE Beyond "Trends" in English and Language Arts Instruction.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *English Instruction; *Language Arts; Public Schools; Reading Instruction; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

The treatment of educational trends is seldom fine-grained enough to communicate the complexity of the issues involved. A "beyond-the-trend" analysis of movements and countermovements in composition, reading, literature, and oral language reveals some new wrinkles in trends that are now well established in the professional literature of English and language arts. In composition, the writing process movement has recently come under scrutiny that has resulted in some useful clarifications and refinements. A central point is that "natural process" instruction is less effective than instruction that combines theory with clearly defined goals and procedures. Other issues in composition include writing evaluation, the role of computers in writing instruction, teaching composition to basic writers, and teaching expository writing in the elementary school. Two major issues in reading instruction are the teaching of vocabulary and the use of basal readers. In literature instruction, few aspects have generated more comment than the teaching of values through literature and the related question of content of the literature program. The absence of empirical data about whether and how values are discussed in literature instruction does not make the question any less significant. Finally, issues in the area of speaking and listening instruction include the concept of guided oral discourse (using techniques of reciprocal teaching, scaffolding, inquiry teaching, and cooperative learning), and the "English First" movement. (Eighty-nine references are attached.) (MM)

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BEYOND "TRENDS" IN ENGLISH AND LANGUAGE ARTS INSTRUCTION

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Trends. You hear about them all the time, reported in professional journals, outlined and implemented in inservice sessions, smothered in jargon or laid out in terms that seem to be, indeed usually are, deceptively simple.

The problem is, treatment of educational trends is seldom fine-grained enough to communicate the complexity of the issues involved. Worse yet, by the time a clear picture of a trend has been formulated, a new development is often afoot, challenging the assumptions of the trend-turned-cliche and offering alternative views which, in time, might alter your view of the trend in important ways.

I won't try to solve those dilemmas in this article. What I will do, though, is point out some new wrinkles in trends that are now well established in the professional literature of English and language arts. I'll give a capsule explanation of recent developments, using deceptively simple language and italicizing key phrases in the text, but citing sources numerous and varied enough to sugest the complex dimensions of the topics. Virtually all citations will be from 1986 to the present. All that objectivity is tempered by the fact that any quick view of the educational horizon is bound to reflect the summarizer's perceptions of what those indistinct shapes on the horizon really are. But no more caveats. Here are some beyond-the-trend analyses of movements and countermovements in composition, reading, literature, and oral language.

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Composition

The writing process movement, a major trend of the 1980s, has recently come under scrutiny that has resulted in some useful clarifications and refinements. Based on classroom applications of ideas from influential theorists like Flower and Hayes (1980), writing process instruction has been variously described as rigidly sequential steps of prewriting/drafting/revising on one hand, and as undisciplined "free writing" on the other (Rodrigues, 1985, Kucer, 1987).

Recent studies suggest that modified process approaches are needed. A central point in Hillocks' (1986) meta-analysis of writing research is that "natural process instruction," which underplays structured assignments and teacher intervention, is less effective than instruction that combines theory with more clearly defined goals and procedures.

The teacher's role in process instruction is also discussed in Writing Report Card (Applebee, et al., 1986), the recent National Assessment of Educational Progress Report. The NAEP report found that although teachers who use process methods do not presently seem to be producing better writers, students who employ process techniques such as planning, revising, and editing (regardless of their teachers' instructional methods) do indeed produce superior written products.

The NAEP report correctly notes that the process movement is still young, as instructional movements go. But further development in crucial related areas—such as ways of testing writing and evaluation of the teaching of writing (Piazza and Wallat, 1987)—will also be required if the writing reform trend is to yield enduring results.

The role of computers in writing instruction is another issue that has taken some new turns. After an early flurry of predictions about revolutionary effects of computers (e.g., Cleaver, 1981; Zakariya, 1982), educators have settled down to deal with some fundamental issues—notably, the genuine utility of computers in teaching revision and the need to focus on keyboarding as an essential skill. While various modes of Computer-Assisted Instruction (CAI) still hold promise for the teaching of writing (Hubert, 1985), the teaching of revision via word processors has emerged as the major use of computers in English. Word processing software materials such as Bank Street Writer and WordPerfect permit students to do extensive revision without laborious hand-copying—and intensive skill in revision is clearly a major goal of composition instruction (Brown, 1985; Wheeler, 1985).

Concerns about revising by computer are premature, though, if students lack sufficient keyboarding skills to compose on the computer. Koenke (1987) notes that some useful studies are appearing on several aspects of keyboarding—e.g., the feasibility of teaching keyboard skills to elementary students (Jackson and Berg, 1986; Warwood, 1985); rates of typing speed needed to avoid student frustration in composing via keyboard (Cox and Donin, 1985; Wetzel, 1985); organization of instruction in keyboarding, including time span of instructional sessions and number of sessions required (Jackson and Berg; Warwood; Wetzel); quality of computer software for keyboard instruction (Nolf and Weaver, 1986). At least two states, Alaska (Parston, 1985) and New York (1986) have published curriculum guides for teaching of keyboarding in the total composition program.

Teaching composition to basic writers—i.e., those who are markedly deficient in writing performance—is a matter of increasing urgency at all grade levels. The aforementioned NAEP study confirms past research indicating that ineffective writers come disproportionately from disadvantaged-urban communities and Black and Hispanic populations. A NAEP report on students' problems with usage and mechanics (Applebee, et al., 1987) supports the notion that diagnosis and prescription based on actual student errors are superior to workbook sequences and global attacks on such problems with students of all ability levels. Rubin and Dodd's (1987) prewriting oral language exercises provide useful directions for teaching basic writers, adding to an increasing repertoire of language-based techniques— e.g., sentence combining (Strong, 1986) and language/thinking skills materials (Stanford and Stanford, 1985). It is important to add, underlining Rubin's point, that there is increasing skepticism about materials and techniques specially "simplified" for basic writers. Many of the techniques that promote higher order thinking in general and thoughtful writing in particular are applicable to students of varying backgrounds and ability levels (Marzano, et al., 1988).

Finally, the increasing interest in the teaching of expository writing in the elementary school is worth noting. (See, e.g., McLaughlin, 1987). This is traceable in part to the well-documented neglect of expository writing instruction in elementary schools (Applebee, et al., 1986) and to increased general interest in the study of nonfictional prose as a literary genre (Commission on Composition, 1987).

Reading

Two major issues in reading instruction are the teaching of vocabulary and the use of

basal readers. Considerable ferment exists both in practice and research on ways to improve reading comprehension through vocabulary instruction. Traditional approaches such as learning definitions, examining prefixes/suffixes/root words, and using context clues have produced little measurable improvement in reading comprehension. Although students who read extensively can indeed infer word meanings from context clues, teaching the use of context clues in itself does not affect reading comprehension for most students (Nagy, Herman, and Anderson, 1985; Schatz and Baldwin, 1986).

Effective vocabulary instruction is multi-faceted, stressing relationships among words to assure deeper processing of underlying concepts. Prereading vocabulary study should not deal with a mere list of unfamiliar words from the text to be studied. Since students can comprehend texts without understanding every unfamiliar word, helpful prereading vocabulary study focuses on clusters of words related to the main theme or topic of the text (Nagy, 1988). Meaningful relationships among words can also be taught through techniques involving graphic arrays--e.g., semantic maps (Heimlich and Pittelman, 1986), semantic feature analysis (Anders and Bos, 1986), and hierarchical arrays (Kirby and Kuykendall, 1985). Linking new words to students' prior knowledge (schemata) is another powerful aspect of many of these integrative techniques for teaching vocabulary (Ogle, 1986).

These developments in research and practice in vocabulary instruction and reading have only begun to appear in teacher training programs and instructional materials. Moreover, Stahl and Fairbanks' (1986) meta-analysis points to the greater complexity of effective vocabulary teaching, which includes orchestrations of old and new techniques. Good instruction is explicit and intensive, yet the teacher also helps to guide the student's

extensive reading and seizes opportunities for incidental instruction. (See the special Journal of Reading issue on vocabulary, April 1986, v29 n7.)

The role of basal readers in American education has been debated for decades. (See, e.g., Stone, 1922.) But only in recent years have formidable scholarly studies and political forces been marshalled in efforts to effect fundamental changes in basals. The highly influential volume Becoming a Nation of Readers (Anderson, et al., 1985) acknowledges systematic alternatives to the use of basals such as whole language instruction and emergent literacy approaches but essentially recommends more thoughtful use of basal texts and calls for improvement of future materials. (For alternative views see Davidson, 1988)

Cassidy (1987) holds that publishers have become more responsive to the legitimate criticisms of basal readers and are rapidly improving their technical aspects and literary quality. Others, though, see changes as minimal and regard the basal textbook as a continuing obstacle to creative reading instruction. They view basals as part of an entrenched system, driven more by market research than by concern for the learner (Goodman, et al., 1988).

Although the controversy over basals sometimes takes on a doctrinal cast, reflecting what Dillon (1985) has called a "hardening of the ideologies," eclectic approaches have been advanced. (A many-sided discussion of basal readers appears in the January 1987 Elementary School Journal, v87, n3.) Consistent with recommendations in Becoming a Nation of Readers, many reading specialists hold that literature-based reading instruction can compensate for the overemphasis on skills found in many basal-dominated

programs. Higgins (1986) notes that students who have read widely in non-basal materials in early grades are less perplexed by more complex literary narratives and abstract content area texts when they enter upper elementary grades.

In fact, literature-based language arts instruction has received increasing attention at upper elementary levels (Poole and Poole, 1986; Cummings, 1987) and secondary levels (Myers and Hughes, 1985), quite aside from debates over basals. The profession appears to be reacting to a decade of emphasis on composition by giving renewed attention to literature study and to the use of trade books in language arts programs (Commission on Literature, 1986; Fielding, et al., in press). Innovative reading tests, moreover, are focusing on self-contained selections rather than disjointed snippets in statewide assessment programs (Valenica, 1987; Peters, and Wixson, 1987).

Literature

Few aspects of literature instruction have generated more comment than the teaching of values through literature and the related question of content of the literature program. Leaders from numerous organizations and agencies—among them, former Secretary of Education William Bennett (1986), Lynne Cheney of the National Endowment for the Humanities (1987), Nancy McHugh of the National Council of Teachers of English (1987), David Hornbeck of the the American Association of School Administrators ("Values Education Belongs in Schools," 1987), the American Federation of Teachers and the Educational Excellence Network (Connell, 1987), and the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development Panel on Religion in the Classroom (1987)—have commented on various aspects of teaching values.

While generally agreeing that public schools should not be advocates of particular belief systems, these educational leaders typically argue for the teaching of a common store of insights and values—variously called cultural, civic, moral, and intellectual values—that make our experience as a people cohesive. They note that history and literature are the subject areas that carry our cultural heritage forward in the most explicit ways.

Literature is a crucial discipline because values are embedded in complex, often ambiguous ways in literary works (DeMott, 1984). Some critics (e.g., Ryan, 1986) believe that English teachers seriously neglected analysis of values in the 1960s and 1970s, turning to skills instruction or stressing subjectivity in discussions of the moral dimensions of literary works. Others (e.g., Howell, 1987) hold that English teachers have continued the longstanding tradition of discussing moral and philosophical aspects of literary works.

The absence of empirical data about whether and how values are discussed in literature instruction does not make the question any less significant. The problem is of immense importance both to English educators and the public, especially in its most controversial aspect—viz., the teaching of religious values. Studies by Vitz (1985) and Bryan (1985) and critiques from groups as diverse as People for the American Way (Davis, 1986) and the Americans United Research Foundation (cited in McDermott, 1986) have revealed neglect of traditional values and religious topics in social studies, English, and reading textbooks.

The teaching of literature will no doubt be affected by the outcome of important

litigation centering on several aspects of religious values in instructional materials, student reading lists, and school library books. Among the issues are First Amendment rights, separation of church and state, secular humanism as a belief system, and the parents' right to demand alternative texts when existing ones run counter to their beliefs. (Details of recent suits, decisions, and appeals in recent cases—e.g., Mobile, Alabama; Hawkins County Public Schools, Tennessee; and Panama City, Florida—cannot be provided in this brief summary.)

Discussions of values take on a different cast in the debate over content of the literature program within the profession. There, the decades-old debate about the teaching of classics and the teaching of popular literature continues, expressed most recently in terms of content-based instruction and process-based instruction (Sims, 1986; Suhor 1988).

Advocates of process instruction have been increasingly challenged, e.g., by Finn ("In Box," 1987), to articulate the what of language arts instruction as well as the how. It is not sufficient to argue that process is the primary aspect of language arts; hard questions remain concerning what literature should be taught, and to whom. Those who favor a traditional canon of great works have been supported in the 1980s by numerous programs and texts. The Paideia Proposal (Adler, 1982) and A Nation at Risk (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) have been followed by the widely publicized texts by Bloom (1987), Cheney (1987), and Ravitch and Finn (1987). Indeed, classroom teachers seem to be gravitating towards exchange of ideas on teaching familiar literary classics (e.g., Carter, 1985).

At the same time, champions of the increasing repertoire of young adult materials continue to affirm its value for promoting enjoyment of literature, stimulating class discussion and writing, and even teaching difficult literary concepts (e.g., Amidon, 1987). Curriculum leaders in some states and school districts (e.g., California State Department of Education, 1987) have taken a middle ground, defining reading goals in terms of process while offering lengthy lists of literary works as suggested materials for classroom study.

Hirsch's (1987) call for development of cultural literacy brings a different dimension to the debate over content. His views relate to many disciplines, but he draws from schema theory, and includes numerous literary items on his list of important cultural information. Cultural literacy (which in Hirsch's system involves an "extensive curriculum"—the learning of numerous items of information that help readers to understand allusions in texts written for general, literate audiences) has been justifiably attacked as trivial, elitist, and psychologically and pedagogically unsound (Tchudi, 1987). But Albert Shanker (1987) of the American Federation of teachers is among those urging serious consideration of cultural literacy, and general interest in the idea is presently strong.

Speaking and Listening

The phrase guided oral discourse in the classroom is a convenient umbrella for numerous techniques that hold promise for significantly strengthening classroom interaction (Marzano, et al., 1988). Variously called "supervised conversation" (Thaiss, 1986), "thinking together" (Staton, 1983), "dialogical instruction" (Paul, 1986), and "problem

centered discussion" (Hillocks, 1986), the purposeful use of discussion to generate and intensify understanding has gained considerable support.

In recent years scholars have validated what many English and language arts teachers have long contended--that classroom discussion need not be mere recitation on one hand, or free-floating chatter on the other. Of course, there is a powerful historical tradition of concern with oral discourse, from ancient Greek philosophy to contemporary rhetorical theory; and psychologists such as Vygotsky and Piaget have noted the centrality of oral discourse in children's cognitive growth. Recent studies have built upon those traditions and modified them by providing a growing research base for oral discourse in the classroom, and by suggesting methods that effectively promote learning through oral language.

Among the techniques for guided oral discourse are reciprocal teaching, scaffolding, inquiry teaching, and cooperative learning. Usable at various grade levels and across the curriculum, these methods combine verbal fluency with educational purpose as students negotiate content-relevant ideas. In reciprocal teaching (Palincsar and Brown, 1985) students are involved in summarizing, question-generating, clarifying, and predicting as they read texts or observe phenomena. The teacher and students share responsibility for the verbal exchanges, providing cognitively focused discussions that do not have the restrictiveness of recitation. Lehr (1985) describes instructional scaffolding as a widely applicable technique in which the teacher initially provides a relatively high degree of verbal structure--a "scaffold" that assures a firm grounding for student discourse--then gradually withdraws the structure as students become increasingly capable of building conceptual edifices on their own.

Inquiry teaching, long known as an interactive method in social studies and science instruction, has been further developed in terms of oral discourse strategies. Hillocks (1986) reports that inquiry methods--teacher and student question/discussion-generating techniques--underlie numerous studies in which students show writing improvement. Collins (1986) shows how teachers use inquiry techniques flexibly during the course of a discussion, helping students to become aware of misconceptions, highlighting what is known and not known, and setting future directions for class activities. Cooperative learning is another potent language-for-learning technique useable in many disciplines. Although cooperative learning activities embrace much more than oral discourse, guided classroom interaction is central. Johnson and others (1984) note that focused group discussion in cooperative learning has both social, value-shaping outcomes and cognitive, meaning-making benefits.

The emphasis on complex, elaborated oral response in recent research seems especially promising. The techniques described above resist reduction to rigid sequences or formulas--a common problem, as Gibboney (1987) has accurately stated, with the popular Madeline Hunter model. (See the February, 1987 issue of Educational Leadership v.44, no. 5, for varied views on Hunter's approach.) Paul (1986) further observes that classroom dialoguing develops such traits as fairmindedness, intellectual empathy, commitment to reasoned analysis, and tolerance of divergent viewpoints. Dialoguing often includes but goes beyond typical Socratic questioning, in which the teacher asks penetrating "thought questions" to elicit discussion. The new interactive techniques are geared towards helping students to pose thoughtful questions as well as respond to such questions.

The "English First" movement (sometimes called "English Only" or "U.S. English") is by far the most widely publicized language issue in recent years. California's Proposition 63, approved by voters in that state in 1986, has been followed by "English Only" bills in 37 states (Crawford, 1987). An amendment to the U.S. Constitution, proposing that English be declared the official language, has been advanced (U.S. Congress). Popular and scholarly periodicals are publishing position statements and reports on the movement (e.g., Hayakawa, 1987; Judd, 1987; "Opinion," in USA Today, 1987). Numerous organizations have taken stands on the issue. The pamphlet "In Defense of Our Common Language" emanates from the group known as U.S. English (n.d.) for example; and the "Epic Events" Newsletter (1988) reports thirty professional associations opposed to the "English first" concept.

Interestingly, many apparent antagonists agree that non-native speakers should be taught English, and that their native languages and cultures should not be denigrated. Disputes center on matters such as the good or ill effects of requiring English to be used in various spheres of public communication; the political motives of those arguing on both sides of the question; and the particular educational and social initiatives that might best promote literacy in English for all of our citizens.

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